

John 9
Sermon title: **Blind from Birth**
Fourth Sunday in Lent - 3/22/20
Dan Crump

I am passing two personal milestones today. First, I have never live-streamed anything, let alone a sermon, and yet I have the privilege to participate in our church's first live-streamed service in this season of social distancing. I hope I don't go viral. Second, the lectionary for today is the gospel of John, chapter 9. I spoke from this exact same text three years ago. A seasoned pastor encounters this situation many times over a long career. I am neither seasoned nor credentialed as a pastor, so I never thought it would happen. It has been enlightening to revisit the same text after three years. As we often hear, the word of our God never changes, but I do; I suspect you do; no doubt, as we have seen in a horrifyingly short amount of time, the world does, too.

The perennial problem with this passage is its length. It's the entire chapter, 41 verses! If I took the time to read them all, I am afraid you might go back to . . . twittering on the . . . face . . . tube before I got to the end. So, as you can see from the bulletin, I am skipping the middle section. I encourage you to check it out later.

John 9:1-12

As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, "Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?" Jesus answered, "Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world." When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, "Go, wash in the pool of Siloam" (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbors and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, "Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?" Some were saying, "It is he." Others were saying, "No, but it is someone like him." He kept saying, "I am the man." But they kept asking him, "Then how were your eyes opened?" He answered, "The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, 'Go to Siloam and wash.' Then I went and washed and received my sight." They said to him, "Where is he?" He said, "I do not know."

Here, the gospel author goes into a long narrative wherein various groups — the neighbors who can't recognize the once blind beggar, the man's parent's who when pressed leave him to face the consequences of his testimony, and that most troublesome word, recurrent in John's gospel, "the Jews" — challenge the formerly blind man's account. The Pharisees come onto the scene to accuse Jesus of the sin of working on the Sabbath, which renders the miracle impossible on account of the fact that God would never work a miracle through a sinner. The man born blind is alone in his effort to respond.

Eventually, he suffers excommunication from the resources of his community and is driven out of the synagogue.

John 9:35-41

“Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him." Jesus said to him, "You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he." He said, "Lord, I believe." And he worshiped him. Jesus said, "I came into this world for judgment so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind." Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, "Surely we are not blind, are we?" Jesus said to them, "If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, 'We see,' your sin remains.

For the word of God in scripture, for the word of God within us, for the word of God among us.
Thanks be to God.

Now, one way I have changed in three years is that I find myself bristling more than usual at the way the gospel author portrays a Jesus who essentially says elsewhere, “I am the way. I am the truth.” It’s not the gospel author’s fault. I have lost all my patience with people claiming to have untested yet unquestionable authority on a host of insanely complex global problems like climate change, income inequality, immigration, international trade, or health care, just to name a few. And I am not going to name any of these people. There is no shortage of them; you can take your pick. It barely needs stating that we are, as a culture, in a crisis as to where to assign authority.

I also bristle at the way the gospel author portrays the group of people usually referred to as “the Jews.” This gospel is widely viewed as the most anti-semitic of the four. There are too many instances of violence throughout human history against anyone deemed “other” to accept any scriptural reading that demonizes them according to any particular claim to absolute truth. It is difficult for me, especially now at this point in history, to not see foregone and untested readings of this gospel as indirectly responsible for the worst of Christianity’s pogroms and inquisitions.

Yet, here we are, bristles and all, proclaiming this scripture as the word of God. Perhaps we can use our “bristles” to scrub the hands that faithfully seek to do God’s will, to wash away the old conclusions that have so often led to hate, violence, exclusion, and death. First step, wet your hands. Now, add the soap, the awareness that when we read scripture, we are essentially reading someone else’s mail. We don’t know who wrote this gospel, and we can surmise but never know with certainty to whom it was written. We cannot assume that God inspired its writing specifically for us in this time and place without denying the truth God intended for someone somewhere else. So, scrub that spot a little more vigorously. Don’t worry if it doesn’t come clean the first time. Just hit it again the next time you actually wash your hands, which, if you are following government guidelines, will be soon.

Most Biblical scholars have accepted recent scholarship associating John's gospel, along with the first, second, and third epistles of John, and the book of Revelations, with a specific community of early Christians dubbed the Johannine community. Father Raymond E. Brown, New Testament professor at the esteemed Union Theological Seminary for 29 years, and widely regarded Johannine scholar, cites a recent reconstruction of the history of this community¹. The Early Period is marked by the effort to persuade Jews to come to Jesus and find him to be the Messiah, according to well-formed Jewish messianic expectations.

The Middle Period reflects a backlash from the Jewish synagogue calling for proof of the claim that Jesus was the foretold Messiah. This backlash led to suspicion and serious persecution including expulsions from the community and even accusations of capital crimes to Roman authorities amounting to a threat of state-sponsored murder. The Johannine community then doubled down by elevating Jesus to near-divine status as a doctrinal test to determine for the sake of their safety who was with them and who was against them. The Late Period, which is ostensibly the time in which the gospel was written, is marked by the recognition within the Johannine community of the need to create a gospel with the potential to speak to and to unify several divergent groups of potential believers.

With a little imagination, we can see these groups represented in the story of the man born blind. The Pharisees might be the synagogue leaders leading their flock with the sanction of the Roman overlords. The Jews might be those enjoying that sanction, both protective of it and dependent upon it for community. The man's parents might represent Christian Jews still worshiping in the synagogue who fear being found out and expelled. Together, they all challenge the personal testimony of the man born blind.

This man whose story only appears in this gospel is often recognized as a hero to the Johannine Christians, as is the mysterious unnamed beloved disciple who appears later in the gospel, the one whom the Johannines credit with the eye witness account upon which they base their singular vision of Jesus. I have been toying with the idea that the man born blind and the beloved disciple were connected, if not, historically, one and the same person. Who better than a man who received his sight directly from Jesus to claim as your eye witness? Alas, I have found no corroboration from minds much sharper than mine, so I will put it away with my many other probable red herrings.

But the man born blind does, in the view of Father Brown, appear to be acting out the history of the Johannine community. First, being blind from birth, he comes to the faculty of sight very late in the game just as the Johannines received the gospel perhaps as many as forty years after the crucifixion. None of us can fully imagine what this must have been like to see for the first time as an adult. Sight generally comes as standard equipment on humans. We learn to use it, abuse it, take it for granted, and, most often, simply ignore most of what it tells us about . . . everything. We can easily imagine losing it. Just close your eyes. The world we see in our

¹<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/002096437703100404>

waking moments disappears. We can imagine having it restored. Open your eyes. See? The same world you saw before you closed your eyes greets you, most likely with very few surprises. It's called object permanence. We learn it the moment "Peekaboo" fails to provoke that purest and most precious laughter.

Jesus does not "heal" this man, in the sense that a former state is restored or a "dis-ease" is removed. The man came into the world without the ability to perceive the visible spectrum of light. He has learned up to this point in his life to navigate his world by other means. Monty Python's *Life of Brian* makes a joke of a similar man, now healed, who whines that he has lost his perfectly good begging gig and now has to get a job.

Notice that the man receives sight as a gift from someone other than himself, but in a way that seems specifically crafted so that the man sees the world around him before he sees the one who gave him that capacity to see. He can now see who has given him sight, but that person is not available to be seen. Add to this the fact that he must now describe what has happened — to several groups of people all of whom doubt virtually everything about his story including the fact that he ever used to be blind. He must defend Jesus' apparent violation of religious law through which he was granted sight. And he must do this without the corroboration of the one who made his sight possible. A tight spot, indeed, and one the Johannine community clearly believed they shared in their social context. It is only after he is ejected from the community that Jesus "finds > him" and that his story is finally corroborated, but of course, then, it is the ones who challenged his story that are nowhere to be seen.

For most of church history, John's gospel has been read as a doctrinal test for who is in and who is out. For a community such as the Johannines risking disconnection from the resources of the larger community and a potential death sentence, it matters who you allow into your circle of trust. Such a test in the hands of institutionalized power, however, becomes a weapon against the weak. Religious conviction allied with human government has yielded, and still yields horrors rivaling the worst of purely secular ideologies.

This recent scholarship into the community that produced John's gospel challenges its usage as a test of who merits salvation, because it exposes the limitations of personal testimony, especially personal testimony to the revelation of God, as a basis for communal identity. Testimony to the impossible, to the rupture of the possible, does not unify, it divides. Testimony to the insufficiency, the unfairness, of the status quo, does not unify, it excludes. Such testimony drives the testifier to the margins, if not outside the camp altogether.

What we need is not a doctrinal test against which to assay divine revelation, we need a way to hear the testimony to that revelation. Father Richard Rohr states that the only two paths by which the human soul experiences God is through great love and great suffering. They come down to the same, he says, because great love yields great suffering. We need to hear God in the testimonial cries of the children separated from their parents at the border. We need to hear the cries of parents testifying to the inability to provide for their children even before they lost their jobs to the coronavirus shutdowns. We need to hear the testimony of those whom

society excludes, who know, who have seen for themselves, that they are created in God's image.

Robin DiAngelo, author of the book, White Fragility, speaks of leading workshops on racism with white folk.

"When white people ask me what to do about racism and white fragility, the first thing I ask is, 'What enabled you to be a full, educated, professional adult and not know what to do about racism?' It is a sincere question. How have we managed not to know, when the information is all around us? When people of color have been telling us for years? If we take that question seriously, and map out all the ways we have come to not know what to do, we will have our guide before us."²

We need to start hearing testimonies of those who in spite of their suffering witness God's power and loving presence as if, blind from birth, we have received our sight directly from Jesus, empowering us for the first time to see others as Jesus sees us.

Will you pray with me?

God, Ground of the possible and Source of the impossible, we now face the unknown to an extent unimaginable only days ago with eyes accustomed to the familiar, with eyes that are blinded by our inability to ignore the obvious. God, we are blind to your way and your wisdom. Give us eyes to see your face. Give us eyes to see others as you see us, so that we may work Your work while it is still day. Amen.

²DiAngelo, Robin. White Fragility: Why It's so Hard for White People to Talk about Racism. London: Allen Lane, an imprint of Penguin Books, 2019.